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THE DECORATED LETTER AND THE ILLUMINATOR'S ART
September 25 - December 19, 1993

In medieval and Renaissance illuminated manuscripts, enlarged ornamented letters at the beginnings of chapters, verses, and other important texts served both to beautify the text and give it order--to help the reader quickly find the opening lines of a text in a book without numbered pages. **The Decorated Letter and the Illuminator's Art**, an exhibition on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from September 25 to December 19, 1993, examines the history of the decorated letter in brilliantly illuminated works dating from about AD 1000 to the early 17th century. Eighty single leaves from liturgical works, such as gospel books, missals, choral books, and books of canon and civil law, and five complete manuscripts were selected from the Museum's own rich holdings and those of several private collectors. Stephen Fliegel of the Department of Early Western Art organized the exhibition, his second on the subject of manuscript illumination; a 1991 exhibition, **Scriptorium: The Illuminated Book in Medieval Art**, introduced Museum audiences to the techniques of illumination and the functions of specific manuscripts.

The decorated letter took a multitude of forms, reflecting the imagination, artistry, and individuality of the illuminator. The letter might be formed of human figures, animals, or hybrid creatures, or of interlaced geometric forms or intertwined sprays of foliage and flowers, often painted in bright colors on burnished gold. It frequently served as a frame for a portrait of Christ, the Virgin Mary, a saint, or a person or scene associated with the text. For example, the initial letter of the first psalm often pictures King David, the author of the psalms, and a miniature painting of the nativity of Christ would introduce the words of a choral response sung on Christmas Day.

Before 1200, illuminated manuscripts were almost exclusively the products of scribes working in monasteries and abbeys. The illumination of books was gradually assumed by workshops staffed by lay craftsmen who specialized in specific tasks of illumination, such as initials, miniatures, or border decoration.

In the earliest work in the exhibition, a luxurious manuscript inscribed in silver and gold ink on purple parchment, produced in Germany about 980, the letters that begin important texts are enlarged and extended into the margins. Such emphasized letters, found in late classical and early medieval manuscripts, gradually developed into the elaborate, ingeniously designed initials seen in pages from 11th-century German and Byzantine manuscripts and monumental bibles produced in England and France during the 12th and 13th centuries.

A leaf from a beautifully illuminated missal made for Beauvais Cathedral about 1300 illustrates a decorative device which had developed in Paris about this time: plant-like tendrils emerge from initial letters on the page to meander along its margins and frame the columns of text; fanciful little hybrid animal and human figures (drolleries) perched on the tendrils add further embellishment.

During the Renaissance, Italian illuminators created especially sumptuous initial decorations. Three superb examples in this show, initials from a choral book, were painted about 1470-80 by Guglielmo Giraldi del Magri, illuminator to the court of the Duke of Ferrara. His jewel-like design of a letter R, framing a portrait of King David, incorporates motifs of gemstones, pearls, and classical cameos, painted in brilliant reds, blues, and greens against a burnished gold ground. Another magnificent example of Renaissance illumination is an enormous (30-1/2 x 21-inch) leaf from a choral book painted about 1480 for Ferrara Cathedral, probably by Cosimo Tura, an artist known largely for his altarpieces and panel paintings. The large initial R which is the focus of this work introduces the text for the mass of the dead, which begins with the words "Requiem eternam." It frames a realistically rendered scene of a vaulted chapel where a priest surrounded by acolytes reads the office of the dead over the body of the deceased. The text is bordered by bands of decoration, including miniature paintings of saints and the coat of arms of the Bishop of Ferrara.

The decorated letter did not suddenly disappear with the invention of printing. The earliest printers, who were former illuminators of books, continued the tradition of designing decorated letters as woodblock prints, a practice that continues to the present day.

The exhibition is installed in Prints and Drawings galleries 109 and 110.

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